

Conference Reports

Ecological Assessment of Products, Companies and Sectors

Conference held at the House of the Industry, on the 17.3.1999 in Vienna, Austria

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On the 17th of March, the Conference on "Ecological Assessment of Products, Companies and Sectors" took place at the House of Industry in Vienna, Austria. It was organised under the auspices of the *Austrian Federal Ministry for Environment, Youth and Family Affairs* by *Environmental Management Austria* in co-operation with the *Institute for Industrial Ecology*, both Partners of the *Academy of Lower-Austria* in St Pölten. It was a large success in terms of the number of participants (around 60) and in terms of the interest and motivation of the representatives from governmental institutions, industry, LCA researchers, and a few NGOs joining this event. The variety of presentations and discussions gave insights on the important activities and developments in the domain of environmental evaluation in industry in Austria and abroad.

Thomas Jakl (*Austrian Ministry for Environment*) and Reinhold Christian (*Environmental Management Austria*) opened the conference with an overview of the program. "For a sustainable, durable, environmentally sound development we need to change our modes of production and consumption", as outlined by Reinhold Christian. The morning was dedicated to presentations by practitioners and experts for company ecobalances and LCAs from Academy, Industry and Government. The afternoon focused on discussions on the topics of "companies and sectors" and "products and services" in two separate workshops.

The Presentations

The presentations were chaired by Andreas Windsperger and Thomas Jakl. The session started on the subject of the Life Cycle Assessment of Products. Frieder Rubik from the *Institut für Ökologische Wirtschaftsforschung, Germany* introduced the subject by giving an overview on the developments of the Integrated Product Politics in Europe, stressing that IPP is playing an increasing role in the European commission. Walter Klöpffer, *CAU GmbH and Editor of the Int. J. of LCA* presented the history and the state-of-the-art of the LCA methodology.

Thomas Jakl continued with the requirements of chemical products in view of a more ecological policy in the chemical sector, underlining the particular need for a reduction of material and energy demands for products and services in this sector. Frieder Rubik, *IÖW Heidelberg*, presented applications of LCA in companies and the general strategies to implement and institutionalise continuous improvements of processes with LCA. In the direction of consumers, Andreas Tschulik, *Austrian Ministry for Environment*, presented the Austrian Ecolabel for Products and Services, which aims mainly at influencing the demand side to support environmentally friendly products.

Andreas Windsperger, from the *Institute for Industrial Ecology, St Pölten*, showed the general framework and the different applications of environmental parameters to measure and evaluate industrial activities. Werner Gargitter from *Denkstatt Umweltberatung und -management, Vienna*, presented practical

approaches on how to deal with EMS and LCA in companies. More in depth in the LCA methodology, Walter Klöpffer gave an overview on the possibilities and limits of aggregations and evaluation methods. Finally, Matthias Finkbeiner from *PE Product Engineering, Germany*, presented the "integrated balancing" in practice, a methodology developed to integrate environmental analysis in product engineering.

The Workshops

The participants were divided into two groups, one dealing with the assessment of products and services, and one with the ecobalances of companies and sectors.

Workshop "Companies and Sectors"

The general opinion of the workshop was that "LCA tackle(s) a lot of aspects outside the company", and can thus be seen more as a strategic tool. To come to its broad use in companies, political support of LCA as well as measures to motivate industry in this direction are needed. On the other hand, participants found a lot of benefits for companies, like the knowledge about possible problematic steps in the entire process-chain. There was agreement that LCAs would be implemented more in company ecobalances if clients would ask for it, possibly creating a snowball effect.

Furthermore, the increasing number of LCA studies, as well as data bases in LCA-tools, will support its increasing application in company practice. Despite the advantages of the PC-tools there were concerns about the risks of a loss of transparency, up-to-dateness and validity. It was also complained that LCAs are not enough reproducible and depend on the method used. Finally, more work would be needed to elaborate unified, acceptable LCA methods for distinct applications, to avoid a misuse of LCA by choosing the suitable method to obtain the desired results.

More controversial were the discussions about the cost-benefit relation of LCA for the companies. Whereas some saw economic benefits, most of the participants had doubts. An increasing demand for documentation of the total pressures behind products would possibly result in economical benefits for companies with good environmental standards.

Workshop "Products and Services"

The workshop focused on typical discussions within the LCA sphere, mainly on the aspects of impact assessment and decision making.

A more in-depth summary is available at <http://www.noe-lak.at/indoek/ecobil/workshop.htm>

The full version of the presentations will be published in the proceedings during the second half of 1999.